Guided Writing

Practical Lessons, Powerful Results

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Acknowledgments

I would like first to express heartfelt thanks to the hundreds of teachers and students in California and across the country who allow me into their schools to teach and grow alongside them. While in these busy classrooms I learn about the craft and realities of scaffolding writing instruction. The sometimes brutal honesty of both teachers and students moves my teaching forward. I decided to write this book to honor them.

When I ask students which of them enjoys writing, often only a few hands go up. Sometimes I also ask them to define writing in their own words. They respond with comments like:

Writing is putting your ideas on paper.

Writing is expressing yourself.

Writing is communicating with others.

Their definitions provide a window into their attitudes toward writing. Sometimes evidence of our emphasis on testing is blatant. One child raised her hand when I asked, "What is writing?" and rattled off the three genres on the district writing proficiency including response to literature, summary, and personal narrative. Another child, a fifth grader, wondered whatever happened to writing about topics of choice and writers workshop. Students often admit that writing isn't fun any more.

After working in many classrooms and listening to teachers and students complain about writing, I decided my goal for this text would be to provide practical lessons that improve writing and motivate students to enjoy writing. I am especially grateful to the staffs at the California elementary schools of Del Rey, Randall, Sinnott, Washington, Wilson, and Lincoln for allowing me to work in their schools while developing these lessons. Special thanks go to Robyn Arthur, Margie Musante, Jill Hope, Kim Burris, Terry Brash, Judy Puckett, Sandy Buscheck, Kelly Thrane, Elisa Carpenter, Katy Johnson, Carol Levin, Kristin Choy, Gery Baura, Kathy Murray, Karen Berry, Kathy McPherrin, and Judy Herns.

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Introduction

Writing is fun and makes people smile. I like writing because it feels like magic
—Alayna

Writing in the Old Days . . .

What do you remember about learning to write in school? Perhaps your early writing experiences were much like mine. Dull. I distinctly recall writing in sixth grade. The lessons followed a predictable pattern. Mrs. Evans gave an assignment and then instructed, "Get out your pencils and write for the next twenty minutes." The stuffy, stifling room grew silent except for the annoying grind of the pencil sharpener as four or five reluctant writers tried to buy a bit more time. There was no modeling, no working together to brainstorm ideas, no rich word bank on the board, and no peer editing or revising. The only sharing of our work came when Mrs. Evans read or asked a student to read the occasional piece of exemplary writing.

When I began teaching, I didn't want to inflict the boring writing environment I had experienced as a child on my students. I couldn't wait to make writing instruction meaningful and fun. My goal has always been to motivate students to write well and to feel like writers. And in the past twenty years we *have* come a long way in our writing instruction. Now we support writers through prewriting, drafting, editing, and creating final copies that we share. We model how to write; we think aloud in front of our students; we draw concrete examples from literature and student work. We even support writers by composing together in shared and interactive writing. In writing workshop, writers explore topics of their choice and work with us and their peers to improve their craft. We provide rubrics with clear expectations for writing assignments. Traits of good writing, including ideas, organization, voice, sentence fluency, and conventions, guide our lessons and assessments.

The Pressure Is On!

Yet even with all this support, students often still stare at the intimidating blank page and teaching writing is still a challenge. The specter of state and national standards and testing add to the pressure that we feel to improve student writing. The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), or the Nation's Report Card as it is often referred to, confirms there is growing concern about student writing: many of our students, sometimes up to two-thirds, are performing below proficient standards.

Rigorous state tests can be difficult for students to pass as well. One fourth-grade teacher friend of mine adds, "I work hard teaching writing, and the students do show progress, but the tests don't always reflect what my students can write. I am really frustrated."

In my work as a literacy consultant in schools around the country I find that many teachers share my concern about teaching writing:

My students write dull, listy pieces and don't add details about their topics.

The students have difficulty organizing their ideas.

I model writing, and then when students write their own pieces they miss parts of the assignment.

Voice is missing from my student's work. They write such dull stories.

Report writing is getting harder for them. They have difficulty synthesizing information and organizing their ideas.

During writing workshop I have trouble meeting with all my students. I can only confer with a few.

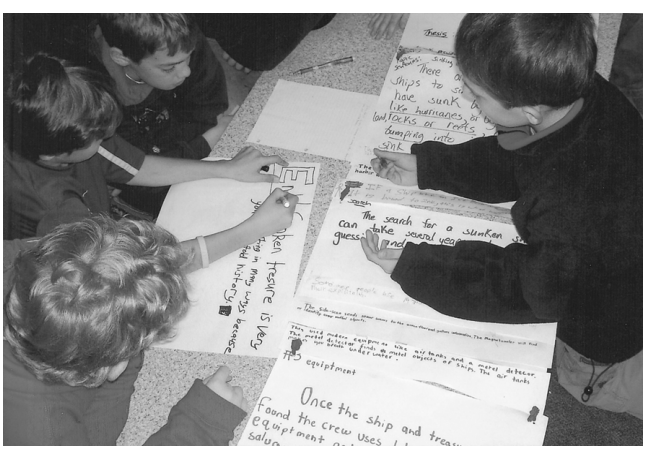
With all the district and state writing assessments we have to give, I have given up allowing students to choose their topics in writing. We simply don't have the time. Help!

We are so focused on teaching the writing genres that are on the test that we have lost our joy for teaching writing.

Sound familiar?

Guided Writing—The Missing Piece

How can we meet the demand for better writing and improved test scores while putting joy back into our teaching? What best practices will improve student writing? For a while I focused heavily on modeled writing, thinking that was the answer. I wrote in front of students on projected transparencies and on chart paper. I followed my modeling with shared writing, in which we wrote a piece together. Even though this approach yielded much better results, students often still missed the mark. I needed more ways to support their writing development. Something was missing.



In my search for better writing instruction, I began to think about the scaffolded way in which we teach reading: modeling by thinking aloud, engaging students in shared reading, guiding students in cooperative or teacher-led groups, and finally encouraging students to work independently. During my writing instruction I was modeling up a storm and doing some shared writing, but I wasn't doing enough guided writing. I began to play with the idea

of adding a "middle piece"—supported, or guided, writing—before releasing students to write independently. Along the way I had many questions:

- What exactly is guided writing?
- Is guided writing parallel to guided reading?
- Is guided writing always done with small groups?
- Can I guide writing in whole-class lessons using cooperative learning?
- How will taking the time to use guided writing improve student writing?
- What do guided writing lessons look like with different genres and at different grade levels?
- What are some creative and motivational ways to make students feel supported as they write?
- How will I make time for one more piece of instruction in my already busy schedule?
- How often should I make use of guided writing strategies?

As I searched for answers, I didn't find many resources on guided writing. While the teachers I chatted with bobbed their heads yes, they knew what guided writing was, their definitions varied. I found a few, but only a few, articles and chapters in professional books devoted to the topic of guided writing. So I set out to build on scaffolded learning research and what we know about good writing instruction and find a way to make guided writing an effective component in my writing program.

What Does Guided Writing Look Like in the Classroom?

During the next seven years, the teachers with whom I worked and I continued to teach whole-class lessons but added a guided writing step, using it at a variety of grade levels. Here are just a few of the things we did:

- After reading an article about the sinking of the *Titanic*, fifth graders worked on group reports while I moved from table to table supporting and guiding their work. They scored one another's group reports before writing their individual reports on one of our nation's fifty states.
- Small groups of third graders wrote guided narratives about a roller-coaster ride after I had modeled how to write a narrative. Then individual students wrote their stories on a special form that guided their writing.
- Groups of first graders worked together writing different beginnings to the same story, then shared their work with the whole class on projected transparencies. During writing workshop, each student used one of the suggested beginnings to start her or his own piece.
- A group of second-language students from all grade levels combined individual "noisy" observations into a group poem. Then each student wrote his or

her own poem, incorporating what had been learned about bringing voice into one's writing. (Later, poetry began showing up everywhere, even in daily journals!)

We consistently found that as a result of these guided writing experiences student writing and motivation improved dramatically.

Guided writing is now a staple in my bag of writing tools. In this book, I share a practical model for guiding your students to improve all aspects of their writing. Specifically, you'll find:

- definitions of guided writing, along with classroom examples/vignettes from a variety of grade levels
- ways guided writing fits into an overall scaffolded writing program that includes modeled, shared, guided, and independent writing
- engaging, practical lessons that motivate students to write better and love writing
- lessons organized around the whole class, cooperative writing groups, and teacher-led small groups
- creative ways for using the lessons during writing workshop or guided reading
- practical suggestions, in every lesson, for incorporating "six-trait writing" (ideas, organization, voice, sentence fluency, word choice, and conventions), an approach to teaching writing originated by Vicki Spandel, Ruth Culham, and the Northwest Educational Laboratory
- reproducibles to use in the classroom
- student examples
- suggestions for small-group conferences
- rubrics for helping students assess their own work
- staff development and coaching suggestions.

How to Read This Book

I write books for busy teachers. Therefore, this is a "flippy" book. You can skip or flip around in the lessons and chapters, picking and choosing what your students need to succeed. However, it will be helpful to get the big picture of how I have uniquely defined guided writing in Chapters 1 and 2. The purpose of those chapters is to give you a broad overview of guided writing within the context of specific steps that apply to any grade level or genre. By reading Chapters 1 and 2 first, you'll see how guided writing might work for you and discover ways to implement it immediately. The other chapters are rich resources for applying guided writing to genres ranging from reports to poetry. Feel free to pick and choose from the lessons in these chapters in any order that makes sense for your students. (If you are a literacy coach, this book is also designed for group study.)

Each genre chapter includes the following features:

- an overview of the lesson concept and the rationale for the lesson
- stories that show guided writing in action in both primary and intermediate classrooms
- specific steps for scaffolding the lesson by way of modeled, shared, and especially guided writing before allowing students to write on their own
- published fiction or nonfiction to use in connection with the identifying examples/modeling portion of the lesson (when appropriate)
- suggestions for using the lesson during writing workshop, in whole-class lessons, and in small-group instruction (to include working with students who struggle with writing)
- graphic organizers and other reproducibles to use in guiding the lesson
- "cool tools" (overhead transparencies, sticky notes, butcher paper, sentence strips, markers, highlighters) for students to use in guided writing groups
- ways to incorporate the "six traits" in teaching and assessing writing
- rubrics for students to use as they write their own pieces and for you to use in guided small-group conferences
- questions for roundtable discussions, staff development sessions, or individual study.

Chapter by Chapter

- *Chapter 1, Scaffolding Writing Instruction: Guiding Writers*: This chapter provides some popular definitions of guided writing in the context of a unique spin that can be applied in a variety of settings in both primary and intermediate grades. It addresses these issues:
  - Is guided writing parallel to guided reading? (Just so you won't worry, it isn't!)
  - What are the benefits of guided writing for students and teachers?
  - How does research support guided writing?
  - How often should I use guided writing?
  - How does guided writing fit into my already busy writing curriculum?
  - What does guided writing look like in the classroom?

  In addition, it outlines the steps for scaffolding writing and provides two exciting lessons, one on descriptive writing, the other on responding to literature through poetry.
- *Chapter 2, Using Scaffolded Writing Steps, Cool Tools, and Graphic Organizers*: This chapter provides detailed descriptions of what modeled, shared, guided, and independent writing look like, as well as explanations of how to use guided

writing during whole-class lessons, with cooperative groups, and with intervention groups. You'll also find ideas for using guided writing during writing workshop and guided reading and practical management tools to help you incorporate guided writing into your own writing program.

- *Chapter 3, Finding Your Voice: Noisy Poems*: "Noisy words," or onomatopoeia, bring life to student writing. When they begin the year by writing free verse, students discover their voice naturally. Or you can use this type of poetry all year long. The result? Even reluctant writers write freely and with voice. The chapter includes exciting minilessons on word choice, descriptive language, and the effective use of metaphors and similes. Students choose their own topics and write away in groups and on their own. As a way to draw out your students' voices in their writing, this poetry really works!

- *Chapter 4, What's Your Story? Personal Narrative and Weekend Webs*: Many schools ask students to record their weekend activities in a journal on Monday morning. Students usually write dull, "listy" pieces as they try to cover everything they did over the two days. In contrast, by brainstorming a weekend web, they cluster their weekend and then select one narrow event or topic to expand and elaborate on, writing about a slice of their life with flair and detail. Students love weekend webs because they help them uncover topics they care about. Weekend webs are a great way to incorporate student choice while building important writing skills.

- *Chapter 5, Write This Way! Patterned Writing, Text Structure, and Author's Craft*: When students study the textual patterns in fiction and nonfiction, first analyzing and then borrowing another author's organizational pattern or word choice, their writing improves. The structure provided allows students to free and celebrate their own writing voice. Groups of students write collaborative pieces to share and then work on individual pieces to collect in a class book. A class-created rubric is an effective way to conduct small-group conferences. These lessons help students think critically and read with a writer's eye!

- *Chapter 6, Read and Write All About It! Expository Writing*: These lessons help students internalize the steps in writing an effective report: a good beginning, paragraphs that build and flow, and a strong ending. (Small-group intervention lessons for struggling writers are included.) First, the class, working in groups, composes reports that they then evaluate and score. Cool tools make the lesson fun, but the skills "stick." Finally, each student writes a report on her or his own.

- *Chapter 7, Lights, Camera, Action! Acting Out Narratives*: Elementary students can enter a pretend world on a moment's notice. Vivian Paley's story plays allow them to do just that. You will be amazed at how quickly students, working in

teams, compose these delightful little dramas that they then act out for one another. The modeling phase includes dramatizing sample story plays and composing a class story play. The chapter includes ideas for using this technique with older or younger buddies. Story plays bring students' writing alive in new and creative ways.

- The *appendixes* are filled with tools for using guided writing in your classroom. The handy assessment rubrics guide your instruction as you work your way through the scaffolded writing model. Minilessons on response to literature, sentence elaboration, and characters representing the six writing traits provide quick, motivating ideas for improving writing. Ways for students to share writing such as the gallery tour or paper passing motivate students to revise their work. A list of children's books as well as professional resources on writing are also included.

I hope you will make these lessons your own and, in the process, discover that your students are enjoying themselves while improving their writing craft. Guided writing is a "best practice" that can make a difference. Happy writing!

Scaffolded lesson

Scaffolded Weekend Web Lessons

Weekend webs and journal entries are often the focus of a fifteen- to thirty-minute writing period on Mondays, a kind of quickwrite to promote fluency. They may also be spread over several days, especially when they are first introduced. After the process is familiar and routine, briefly model your teaching point, provide the shared and guided writing opportunities you think are needed, and let the students dig in (Figure 4.9). Weekend webs should be quick, fun, and easy.

Objectives

- Brainstorm weekend activities on a web or in a list.
- Discuss with a partner the topic chosen to elaborate on.
- Write a brief, focused piece incorporating the strategy or writing skill that was taught in the session.

Identifying Examples

You may not need to use this step every week; it maybe most useful only when you want to teach a new skill, or when examples are readily available. You might also share examples from books throughout the week *after* the lesson. For example, you might model using dialogue in your weekend web piece; then, during the week, you and your students could identify how authors use dialogue in their pieces and the following Monday you could share examples using dialogue and ask students to incorporate dialogue again into their journal entries.

- *Decide on a skill or strategy you wish to teach or reinforce.* Select one you need to teach based on either student needs or your curriculum. Some examples include using dialogue, onomatopoeia, or sensory details; piquing reader interest; varying the beginnings of sentences; adding detail; displaying emotion or humor; and paying attention to interesting verbs or adjectives.
- *State the objective or purpose of the skill or strategy.* Say something like, *When good writers write they use [different verbs] to help them [sound more interesting and give the reader a strong visual picture].*
- *Find examples.* Select a variety of examples of the targeted skill or strategy from books or other texts. It is especially powerful to use samples of other students' weekend journal entries. (Feel free to show your students the ones in this book.)
- *Begin a rubric.* Invite students to turn first to a partner and then discuss with the class what they think is important to remember about using the targeted skill or strategy. Appendix D shows a sample weekend web rubric.

cool tools

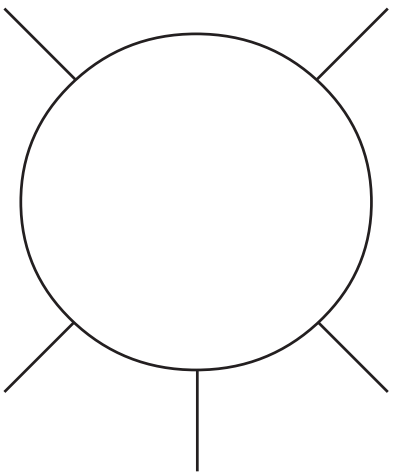
- *Introduce cool tools.* Have students use sticky notes to mark examples of the targeted skill or strategy.
- *Assess student progress*. Do the students need more examples of this skill or strategy? Can they verbalize their observations? Have students turn in their highlighted or underlined examples.

Figure 4.9

Over the Weekend

Name: _____ Date: _____

My Weekend Web



(fold here)

My Topic Is:

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

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Modeling

Modeling is the most powerful portion of any lesson. Try to do it as often as possible.

- *Brainstorm your own weekend web.* Write on either the whiteboard, chart paper, or a projected transparency. Tell students that good writers often write about their own experiences.
- *Select one of your entries and tell why you are choosing it.* If you wish, roll a piece of paper into a "topic tube" and scan your web with it. (See Figure 4.6.) Once you select your topic, think aloud about it: *I have more to say about this. This was really funny [interesting, sad]. This is an image I want to remember in my mind. This was so special I want to remember it in detail.*
- *Begin webbing ideas and details around your selected topic.* Invite students to ask you questions that will elicit details.
- *Write your weekend journal entry.* Tell students what the focus skill is today: *I am writing about the flowers in my yard, so I will use sensory details to help the reader make a picture in his or her head.* Talk as you write each sentence. Pretend to get stuck. Visualize details as a way to remember them.
- *Reread your own writing.* Tell students that good writers reread as they revise and think of what to write next.
- *Add to the rubric.* Ask students to tell what they think is important or what they liked about your modeling.

- *Introduce cool tools.* Check student understanding via thumbs-up or thumbs-down signals: *Did I include enough detail here? Can you see a picture in your head? Do I need to use another verb here?* Volunteers might act out parts of your piece.
- *Assess student progress.* Are students ready to write on their own? Are they in the "mood" to write? Do they need a shared writing step or can you jump to independent writing?

Shared Writing

- *Invite students to help you write a few lines of your weekend journal entry.*

OR

- *Encourage a volunteer to write in front of the class.* Have the rest of the class assist by adding words and sentences. (If the student is a reluctant writer or English language learner you may want to serve as scribe as the student dictates.)
- *Assess student progress.* How did students do during discussions? Are they ready to write? Do you need to call up a small group and guide them while they write their entries?

Guided Writing

- *Implement guided writing during a whole-class lesson.*
  - Meet with table groups. Rotate to tables as students work on their individual pieces. Have each student at the table read his or her piece aloud. Ask the other group members to pay compliments and offer suggestions.
  - Invite a student volunteer in each table group to read her or his piece and tell what else she or he is going to write. Have the other team members write a suggested next line or word the writer could use. (The suggestions might be written on a sticky note or sentence strip to give to the writer.)
- *Implement guided writing with a temporary specific-needs group.* Meet with a different group every Monday (or Tuesday). (Most teachers use weekend webs and journals only once a week.)
- *Implement guided writing with an intervention group*. Group the struggling writers who need extra help and meet with them briefly to help them get started at the beginning of the session or to review their work at the end of the session. You might invite one or two of the class' stronger writers to serve as models and may need to show more examples. These students may need to illustrate their entries before writing.
- *Assess student progress.* Can students now work independently or do they need to continue to meet in a group to finish their work?

Independent Writing

- *Remind students to refer to the rubric for the skill or strategy, your model, and any shared writing pieces for guidance.*
- *Circulate through the room while the students write.* Prompt and support individual students as needed.
- *Offer a three-ring circus* (Pat Cunningham's term). Let students choose how they want to work:
  1. in a group with you
  2. in pairs, talking about their writing as they go
  3. independently at their desk
- *Assess student progress.* Do students apply what they have learned from the modeled and shared writing lessons in their own writing? Do they need to return to a guided group format?

Guided Conferring

- *Have students read their work to each other in small groups,* using the rubric as a guideline for compliments and suggestions. (Weekend webs and journal entries are a fluency tool, and it is best to not mark or grade them.)

Figure 4.10

Possible Weekend Web Minilessons Focusing on the Six Traits

Ideas

- Model how to select ideas to develop in detail. Allow verbal sharing in pairs before students move on to write pieces.

Word Choice

Model how to:

- Use interesting verbs, adjectives, nouns.
- Use metaphors, similes, and personification.
- Use "noisy words."

Organization

- There are different types of writing one might choose for weekend web topics:
  - letter
  - story
  - recipe
  - how-to-piece
  - description
  - poem
- Model inner organization:
  - beginning and ending a piece of writing with quotes, noisy words, a description, or a feeling
  - developing ideas in chronological order
  - setting up and solving a problem.

Sentence Fluency

- Watch out for sentences that all begin the same.
- Watch out for sentences that are all long or all short.

Voice

- Show how voice can be developed in a weekend web using:
  - humor
  - dialogue
  - emotions
  - one's unique opinion or reaction to an event

Conventions

- Reread your piece and add punctuation, capital letters, and correct spellings.
- Write freely at first and pay attention to conventions later.
- Weekend webs and journal entries are all about fluency; no red marks please!

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- *Conduct "read-arounds."* Have students, at their tables or sitting in small circles, take turns reading their pieces. Ask the other students to offer compliments and suggestions. Rotate from group to group, guiding the process as necessary.
- *Conduct a hunt-and-share.* Choose one criterion in the rubric (including a sensory detail, for example). Ask students to find an example in their own work and the share it with a partner. Choose one child to share his or her example with the whole class. Select another teaching point for students to hunt for and share.

Discussion Questions

1. **What are some of the problems with the weekend news routine? Do your students enjoy it? Are you able to use it successfully? Explain.**
2. **How do weekend webs compare with weekend news? What is similar/different? What do you like about each? What are the advantages of weekend webs for your students? Explain. How do weekend webs help intermediate students write personal narratives?**
3. **What does it mean to write only what you can fit into a one-inch frame? How is this kind of short, focused writing helpful to students? How long should weekend journal entries be?**
4. **Create a weekend web and journal entry you might use as a model. Select a topic to web, and write a paragraph or two about it. How does doing this make you feel?**
5. **What are some of the skills/strategies/traits you might teach and reinforce using weekend webs and journal entries? Explain. How would you use a weekend web/journal entry to teach new skills or to reinforce ones you've already taught?**
6. **How can you support your students with guided writing when they write their weekend webs and journal entries? Which option appeals to you most?**

Try It in Your Classroom

- **Try a weekend web/journal entry with your class next Monday. Plan what your modeled web will look like and what you will include from your weekend. Select a small, everyday event to write about instead of an outing. Does this influence your students to select a small event from their web to write about?**